

A NUKUORO FISHING KIT IN THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM, OXFORD

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Abstract. A pad and fourteen fishhooks, including a small trolling lure, from Nukuoro Atoll, are described.

Until well into the nineteenth century, Nukuoro fishermen often kept fishhooks in pads specially made for the purpose, known as *suu*. Some of these pads, with or without their full complement of hooks, are preserved in ethnographic collections, although their provenance is often not recognised. Two such pads were illustrated by Beasley (1928, plates LX, LXI) in his pioneering work on Pacific island fishhooks, but attributed by him to Tahiti. This attribution was repeated by Anell (1955, plate III), who illustrated a third pad in the Musée de l'Homme.

The probability that these pads were not from Tahiti but from the Polynesian outlier of Nukuoro in the Eastern Caroline Islands was suggested by Emory and Sinoto (1965, p.88) following their excavation and study of fishhooks from Tahiti and other East Polynesian island groups. Subsequently, excavation of a large collection of fishhooks on Nukuoro itself, identical to the hooks on the pads in question, has confirmed the Nukuoro provenance beyond any doubt (Davidson 1967, p.191; 1971, p.41).

I have discussed elsewhere (Davidson n.d.) the two pads illustrated by Beasley, one of which is now in the British Museum, and two in the Musée de l'Homme, including that illustrated by Anell. The purpose of this paper is to describe another pad and fishhooks in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

The specimen, 1921.90.139 (Fig. 1), consists of a small pad containing six pearl shell fishhooks; a further eight fishhooks (1921.90.140-147) are now attached to a piece of cardboard. All fourteen hooks were presented to the Pitt Rivers Museum by J. P. Mills in 1921 as a single collection, the only documentation being that they were found in a drawer at Bramall Hall, Bramall, Cheshire. The hooks conform to known Nukuoro types, and although it can no longer be determined whether they represent two separate small kits of six and eight hooks, or a single larger one of fourteen, there is no doubt that they all originated on Nukuoro.

The Pitt Rivers Museum specimen, like those previously described, is made of pandanus strips folded to form a flat rectangular pad stitched together with cord similar to that used in the fishing lines (cf. Beasley 1928, p.41). It measures

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Fig 1. Nukuoro pad with fishhooks. Top. Pad and hooks. Bottom. Hooks on cardboard.
(Photo: by courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford).

15 x 7 cm, somewhat smaller than other recorded examples. The stitching binds the pad together and provides the loops through which the hooks are slipped. If every loop held a hook, there would be approximately 40 hooks in the pad, although the size of the existing hooks suggests that the pad may not have been intended to hold so many. There would, however, be ample room for the other eight hooks in the set, especially if the lines were differently arranged.

The six hooks now in the pad consist of three examples of the archaeological Type V (known to Nukuoro informants as *maimoni* or *buledago*, probably the former) (Fig. 1, middle of pad) and three examples of Type VII (*gadinibidi*) (Davidson 1976) (Fig. 1, 2 left, 1 right). Type V is U-shaped hook, which could be used in a variety of sizes to catch a variety of fish. Type VII is a distinctive form with straight shank leg, fairly consistent in size, used for catching small fish known as *gina* inside the lagoon. These two types of hooks have a similar lashing device and are likely to be found together in approximately equal numbers in individual fishing kits (for example, Beasley's kit, now in the British Museum, has 17 Type V, 16 Type VII, and 6 others). The lashing on each of these six hooks is well preserved, and all except the largest have relatively long lines. All have traces of very fine lines to attach the bait, only three of which are complete. (Bait lines are deemed to be complete if they end in a small knot rather than a frayed end.) The smallest of the Type V hooks (Fig.1, top of pad) has a complete bait line of 18 cm. The largest of the Type VII hooks (Fig.1, bottom right) has a complete bait line of 57 cm. The other two Type VII hooks have a complete line of 13 cm and one frayed off at 14 cm.

The hooks now attached to the piece of cardboard include three more examples of Type VII (Fig. 1, left of cardboard), four others (Fig. 1, bottom and right), and a small trolling lure (Fig. 1, middle top). The three hooks of Type VII are similar to the three in the pad. Although the snoods are in good condition, however, the lines are short and the bait lines in all cases frayed off near the point of attachment to the hook. The other four one-piece hooks on the cardboard resemble each other in shape, and include a larger pearl shell example and three smaller hooks of turtle shell. The remains of snoods on the pearl shell hook and one of the turtle shell hooks are very similar to the snoods on other hooks in the set. One of the unsnooded hooks has tiny lashing grooves on the outside of the shank leg, similar to those normally found on pearl shell hooks of Types V and VII. Moreover, hooks of similar shape appear in two of the other Nukuoro pads, although no complete hooks of this shape were found in the excavations on Nukuoro. Turtle shell, of course, does not survive long in the conditions there. Informants on the atoll spoke of additional types to those excavated, including small turtle shell hooks known as *madau gina* and *madau belubelu*, and hooks apparently similar in shape to those under discussion here, known as *lou*. It seems certain, then, that these hooks are from Nukuoro, and represent another type or types in use at the close of the prehistoric period, but not present in the archaeological collection, which was obtained largely from a single site.

The presence of a small trolling lure in this set of hooks is of great interest. Both large and small pearl shell lure shanks were found in the excavations on Nukuoro, but were very uncommon compared with one-piece hooks. Informants tended to belittle the differences in techniques of fishing with one-piece bait hooks and trolling lures, suggesting that all Nukuoro hooks were used from a moving canoe, and that use of a lure or a one-piece hook, at least for some kinds of fish, was simply a matter of individual preference. The presence of one small lure among 13 one-piece hooks adds some support to this assertion, indicating that a lure could be included in a fisherman's kit otherwise composed of bait hooks.

The shank of this small lure is almost identical to one obtained by excavation on Nukuoro (Davidson 1971, p.45 and fig. 21b). The ethnographic specimen is 3.3 cm long, with maximum width and thickness of 0.4 cm. The excavated specimen is 3.05 cm long with maximum width and thickness of 0.4 cm. The two are very similar in shape, with triangular cross-section, pointed proximal tip with bilateral perforation, and greatest width in the centre. The point lashing of the ethnographic specimen obscures the lashing grooves on the shank, but there are probably three or four, as on the excavated specimen.

The ethnographic specimen is valuable in demonstrating how the archaeological example probably appeared when it was complete and in use. The turtle shell point has a slightly expanded base, but with neither proximal nor distal projection, and two perforations, through both of which the point lashing passes. The line is drawn through the more proximal (and higher) of the two perforations. Unfortunately, the proximal end of the lure is damaged, with the tip of the shank broken and the attachment of the line no longer complete, but it is evident that the lashing here would have followed the widespread Polynesian pattern. The hackle is a piece of bast caught under the distal end of the point lashing. There are no filler sticks. In view of the rarity of securely documented lures from Nukuoro these details are of considerable importance.

As noted above, it is not certain whether these 14 hooks represent one fisherman's kit or two. The generally poorer condition of the eight hooks on the piece of cardboard (incomplete or absent snoods and lines) may indicate that they come from another pad which has disintegrated. On the other hand, the fact that they belong to a single collection with no other hooks associated, and the known propensity of some collectors to remove hooks in order to reveal details of the pad (cf. Beasley 1928, p. 42 and plate LXI) suggest that they probably do belong to a single set. In either case, all are from Nukuoro, and provide further evidence on the range of types in use at the close of the prehistoric period and the proportions in which the different types may occur. Most importantly, this collection shows that small trolling lures, such as were found in small numbers in the excavations on Nukuoro, could form part of fishing kits consisting predominantly of one-piece bait hooks of various types.

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